CALLED TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

November 9, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Scripture
Mark 1:14-20

"And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him."
--Mark 1:17,18 (RSV)

Jesus said to them: "'Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him."

It begins in that instant. Simon Peter and Andrew get up and follow. Oh, to be accurate historically it begins when Mary has a baby in Bethlehem. And to be accurate Biblically you'd have to say that it begins on back in the saga of those chosen people who sense that God has a purpose for them to live out. And to be accurate theologically you'd have to say that it begins at that mystical moment before there are any moments, before time, space, and matter exist, when all there is - is Divine energy and God surveys the void and says, "Let there be light" and there is light, or as the poet images it, it begins when God gets up one morning and says "I'm lonely - I'll make me a world." [The Creation, James Waldon Johnson]

That's the primal, theological beginning, but the beginning of the Christian part of the story, the segment that includes you as a principal actor begins here when Jesus says "Follow me" and two people get up and follow. It begins here, and here is where it rests for us, for if you have not been here: if you have not yet heard that call, and if you have not yet felt the compelling impulse to get up from mending some nets to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, you may not yet know what this Christian enterprise is about.

As those who read their mail and know a little bit about the church calendar realize, this is Stewardship Sunday. Stewardship, for the uninitiated, is the euphemism Christians often use to disguise the fact that the Trustees hope we can raise enough money to pay the bills next year. I have always felt a little sorry for the visitor, innocently walking into a strange church on Stewardship Sunday. If you are visiting a church for the first time in 10 years and the first thing you hear on your return is a pitch for money - it may be another 10 years till you try again. For the visitor from another church - choosing Stewardship Sunday for your visit is not unlike traveling to New York to see a Broadway show and having the understudy in the lead. But before the visitors leave, or the members tune out and start frantically trying to find enough reading material in the bulletin to last for 20 minutes, allow, please, the preacher several prefatory observations...

ONE - Stewardship is not fundamentally about money. Money is part of stewardship. Jesus talked more about money than he talked about sin or the Kingdom of God. But money - how much of it you give to the church and how you use it - is only one dimension of the broader concept of stewardship. If money is the only issue, we do waste a lot of time and energy trying to justify it theologically. A more efficient way to pay the bills is to divide the budget by the number of members and send out assessments. Simpler yet - raffle a Pontiac.

TWO - Stewardship is really about responsible management - management of what we have and are. It is about living responsibly which surely includes intentional generosity. But...

THREE - The issue - the fundamental issue for all of us and each of us: member of Fourth Presbyterian Church, member of some other church, member of no church - is the encounter with Jesus Christ and the response. And so, back to the text...

There is no more startling sequence in the whole Bible. Mark's economy of words is intentional and powerful. Walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw two fisherman mending their nets: Simon and Andrew: "'Follow me and I will make you fishers of men' and immediately they left their nets and followed him." A little later the same thing happens with two more fishermen, James and John. They're in a boat with their father. Finally, Levi, sitting at his desk at the tax office. "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. Just as simple and complicated and disturbing as that.

Simple because there is no more to it. You cannot squeeze anything else out of the text: just the call of Jesus Christ and the immediate response. Complicated and disturbing because everything in us objects to the simplicity. There must have been more to it than that. Perhaps they had known him for some time. They must have been talking about him at least. Perhaps they had contemplated a career change. Perhaps the therapist to whom they looked for help with depression and mid-life crisis had suggested a second career. People don't just leave their nets and follow. Besides, what happens to the boat, the unmended net, the incomplete tax form? Some kind of world it would be if everyone acted like that!

People don't act like that and people didn't act like that in the First Century either. My hunch is that Mark wrote the account in this manner precisely to get our attention. My sense of it is that the abruptness is intentional. It's purpose is to startle us, to stimulate us to ask "What is going on here? People don't act like that?" My sense of it is that here - at the beginning of the first account of the life and ministry of Jesus to be written down, religious faith is being radically redefined rather, as hearing the call of God in Jesus Christ, and responding to it out of the personal immediacies of one's own life - fishing nets, tax forms and all. Mostly we are inclined to think that religion is theology or ethics. Religion, this overture to the Christian enterprise insists, is existential: it is not primarily believing ideas

about God, or following rules: It is hearing a call, encountering the Christ, and responding - getting up and following.

Here the agenda is set for those who want to be friends with Jesus 30 A.D., 1986 A.D.... Call... encounter... response. And here the agenda is set for the Christian Church. The call of Christ - The summons to be with Jesus, to worship, pray and enjoy the celebration, in community, of the Good News. And the Mission, the Mandate to get up and follow, to live a new and different life, as an institution. Jesus said two things essentially. He said "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." And he said "Go ye, into all the world in my name." Come and Go. Call and Response. Celebration and Mission.

That word is ancient. In the Old Testament Lesson, the intriguing, mystical account of the call of the Prophet Isaiah which we heard this morning, the sequence is there. The word of the Lord comes: the prophet is called. The question is put: "Who will go?" The prophet responds "Here am I. Send me." God commands: "Go." The sequence, the rhythm, the counterpoint.... "Come unto me...go into the world" are the heart of the matter.

Those who study theology discover that the great heresies of history were not outright demonic lies, the product of people who hated religion... Heresy is usually a half-truth, masquerading as the whole truth. Dangerous heresies occur when a zealot purposes that his or her portion of the truth is the whole and only truth, is so consumed by a part of the truth that he becomes myopic to the big picture. So the church, the would-be friends of Jesus, has been notoriously inclined to hear one or the other half of the word.

"Come unto me all that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest..." That is so precious - so good - so overwhelmingly gracious to us when we feel burdened. When life has ceased to be fair, when we feel hemmed in, weighed down, when the pace of the world and the demands on us lower our stress level out of sight, Jesus' words of inviting comfort are like soothing balm...like a cold drink on our parched and dry lips and we resist the "Go into the world" part. And so popular religion, typified by the enormously popular television evangelists, seems to present the salvation promised by Jesus Christ as a personal, private, luxury. It is a compelling and for many, moving invitation to an acceptance and affirmation and support that is available nowhere else in life. "Come to me and I will give you rest." To the cynical observer, it is the theological and ecclesiastical expression of the New Narcissism, the religious equivalent of the "if it feels good, do it" school of morality.

It's not that the message is untrue, or inaccurate. It's just incomplete. William Willimon, in a fine new book, <u>What's Right With the Church</u>, writes "When religion is reduced to the momentary psychological high, the sporadic encounter...we are thereby protected from having the faith get under our skin." [p. 37]

The church itself, is tempted to reflect this half-Gospel, by withdrawing from the world or posturing itself as a safe haven from the world, an escape almost from the vexing, stress-producing, wearisome realities of life out there. It is instructive to recall that the most popular Protestant hymn is always "In the Garden" which assures us that faith is a personal matter between Jesus and me, and its arena is the garden, where it is quiet and the dew is on the roses... certainly not Michigan Avenue, or the courtroom, classroom, board room, bedroom.

"Our Lord calls us" Willimon wrote, "not to form a cozy little club of the religiously inclined but to help him turn the world on its head. We cannot be who we are as the church without being involved in the world." [Ibid, p. 53]

Honest, Biblical, incarnational Christianity will have a love affair with the world because God loves the world, and it will hear the call of Christ to go into the world, to be in the world and it will follow that Christ into the world precisely because he loved it so much he was willing to die for it.

Sometimes, of course, the church doesn't hear the summons to come to Jesus. Observers of recent church history suggest that the liberal branch, the social activists have heard the "Go into the world" so clearly and urgently that they miss the invitation to come to Jesus for comfort and strength and support. That too is a danger, one half of the whole truth. The church is not just one more social service agency. The church is not adequately defined as a political advocacy organization regardless of the rightness of its political objectives. That is not to say that the church has no political agenda or political influence. It is to say that our social action and social service do not begin to exhaust the definition of Church or of Christian faith.

Using the common political and social categories, conservative Christians sometimes seem to hold that "Come to Jesus" is what the faith is about. Liberal Christians, on the other hand, sometimes sound as if "Go into the world" defines the faith. The New Testament teaches that it is both: come and go: piety and social action.

Jesus calls us. Jesus called Simon and Andrew to make a difference with their lives. The call to "get up and follow" was a call to involvement, service, action... So he calls us singly - and together as a church. This church has heard that command and has responded.

We make a difference - as a reminder to the world that we live in a world created and loved by God. In an essay written a generation ago the great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr observed that "For the past two hundred years the Christian Church has been proclaiming its Gospel in a world which no longer accepted the essentials of the Christian Faith." [The Essential Reinhold Neibuhr, p. 79] It's not that the Magnificent Mile is hostile to the Gospel. But it is indifferent...the assumption is that whatever it is that happens in here is not terribly relevant. And so our graceful architecture, tucked between soaring glass, stone and steel, is a reminder that we live with the Holy in our midst, that there is a God, that, we make that difference.

We make a difference in the lives of 300 students, mostly minority, mostly disadvantaged who come here for tutoring, and to homeless men and women for whom the Social Service Center is the only place where they are called by name, treated as human beings. We make a difference to the elderly who frequent the Senior Center and people who are hurting and anxious and afraid - and who receive professional attention at the Counseling Center. This church makes a difference because it responds to the call of Christ. The call is to continue - to follow Jesus Christ - to make a difference in the future as well.

What might that mean? It might mean, for instance, that we find a way to increase our tutoring program to accommodate somehow every youngster who wants to be helped. It might mean that we would meet the housing needs of the urban elderly who can't live alone any longer and want desperately to remain in the city. And the needs of the homeless, the permanent homeless who walk our streets and use the warmth and facilities of this building during the day and sleep at nights in the doorways, and alleyways or in the air vents of the Magnificent Mile. And it might mean a Fourth Presbyterian Church clinic in Africa or school in Central America through which we could affirm the oneness of the human family and make some small difference in the ongoing quest for international reconciliation and peace.

This church can make a difference. Christ calls it to that faithful response - to get up and follow... As Christ walked beside the sea and invited Simon and Andrew, so he walks down Michigan Avenue and says to us "Get up and follow."

You can make a difference here - or wherever you express your faith. In fact, I believe part of the glory of the Christian faith is that it takes us seriously as individuals. It suggests that our creator expects a lot of us. Part of the glory of the Gospel is that it humors our individuality by insisting that each one of us makes a difference. We are called to make a difference by giving sacrificially and generously to Christ's church; to join our resources so that the church can be about the work which needs to be done. But there is more to it. We are called to make a difference with the totality of our lives and the impulse, the call, is a part of God's love for us. God's offer of salvation, I have come to believe, is connected to God's summons to make a difference. It has been the Christian experience that it is in loving that we know we are loved, and that it is in serving others that we experience the servanthood of Jesus Christ, and that it is in suffering that we understand the suffering of our Lord on our behalf. We believe that in giving we do receive, and that we begin to experience our salvation when we live our lives for others.

The stage on which that is played out may be relatively modest - no matter. Christ is honored when we make a small difference. At Deborah's Place, a shelter for homeless women not far from here, volunteers report at 6:30 to serve the evening meal and prepare the mattresses and bedding. The 30 or 40 women who come there each night after walking the sidewalks and streets since 6:30 a.m., are treated with careful respect. One couple, prototype young, urban professionals, weekly volunteers, prepare a salad

with all the accouterments and love and care one would invest in a family dinner party. They also bring flowers for the table. They make a difference.

A young man who is one of our volunteer tutors, recently became a church member. Ten years ago, he was one of the Cabrini-Green students who received tutoring at the church.. Someone made a big difference in his life. Now he's back, a graduate, employed, wanting to make a difference in someone else's life.

The Christian secret is that the closer you get to Jesus the more you want to make a difference - and - the more you give yourself to making a difference, the closer you are to Jesus even when you don't realize it.

I learn that every day as I am privileged to associate with Christian people who quietly follow their sense of Christ's call in lives of love and generosity and devotion. I was captivated by the notion, initially, I suppose, as I learned about a young Navy surgeon in the 50's by the name of Tom Dooley. Dooley resigned his commission to practice medicine in the mountains of Laos. He established hospitals, trained midwives and aids, taught hygiene, raised money by badgering governmental officials, business executives and church leaders all over the world. He made an incredible difference in the lives of thousands - and in ways far more dramatic than will ever come to any of us. And then, incredibly, at 32 Dr. Tom Dooley had cancer. After surgery he returned to Laos, fully aware that his disease was terminal. He worked frantically, literally until he dropped dead two years later. And in dying he taught me - what it means to be alive, to live with the fullness that God expects of each of us wherever we are...

At his funeral, the presiding Bishop read several lines from Dooley's favorite poem, Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

"Whose woods these are I think I know
His house is in the village though:
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

"My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

"He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep
But I have promises to keep
And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep."

Those lovely, dark woods, I have been told are Frost's metaphor for death, real death or the symbolic death of meaningless purposeless living. The moment in the poem is the critical one, like that indescribable moment when the piercing eyes of Jesus met the eyes of Simon and Andrew and he said "follow me" and they got up and followed. The moment is the critical one...to live intentionally, or to drift into quiet, selfish oblivion. The resolution is one of brave intentionality, high morality and, for us, faithful responsibility to the Lord Jesus Christ who calls us - to make a difference. ~~The words are lovely, dark and deep.~~

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep
But I have promises to keep
And miles to go before I sleep
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